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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1943  
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1824  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0845  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0850  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0572  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0562  
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 0424  
RUEABND/DEA HQ WASHDC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC  
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC  
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SUBJECT: LOCAL FARMERS PAID FOR ILLICIT POPPY CULTIVATION IN WEST BENGAL

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Illicit cultivation of poppy has been detected in a number of villages in West Bengal's North Dinajpur district. An unidentified group or organization is offering cash payments to farmers to grow illicit poppy. Poppy fields in this district are fragmented small plots, hidden in vegetable or rice paddy fields. The North Dinajpur incidents demonstrate that despite a crackdown in 2007, illicit poppy cultivation is continuing in West Bengal. The state's law enforcement machinery is understaffed, lacks resources and is unable to stop the illicit poppy cultivation. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) During the first week of February 2008, media reports indicated that excise officers from West Bengal's North Dinajpur district destroyed illicit poppy crop worth reportedly USD 350,000. The crop occupied a four-acre plot at Sayeedpur village, under Karandighi Police Station, hidden within the seasonal vegetables growing around the poppy. The value of another lot, destroyed at nearby Itahar town, was reportedly USD 13,000. In the first week of March, poppy crop worth reportedly USD 190,000 was destroyed at Gulandar and Titiha villages (also near Itahar town), Bangabari village (near Islampur) and Begua village of Karandighi. Speaking to Post's EconSpecialist the Magistrate of North Dinajpur admitted the presence of illicit poppy cultivation in his district and that the press reports of the area of land under cultivation was fairly accurate but he added that the values of the crop reported was too high.

¶3. (U) The cluster of villages growing illicit poppy are located about 400 miles north of Kolkata. Law enforcement officials are interrogating the growers. The Magistrate told Post that better and assured returns are inducing farmers to shift to illicit poppy cultivation. The local court has served cautionary notice on the farmers but no one has been arrested.

¶4. (SBU) A West Bengal Excise Department official told post that since early January 2008, his department was getting information about the illicit poppy cultivation in North Dinajpur. According to informants, the farmers were paid cash advance to go in for poppy cultivation. People paying these advances were "outsiders" although they worked through local agents. The excise official said advances were paid from "across the border." (Comment: This would mean either from Bangladesh or Bihar as North Dinajpur is a narrow stretch between the two. End Comment.) The excise official complained of severe resource and manpower shortage and wanted to know if the USG could provide assistance to his department.

¶5. (SBU) Local officials believe there could be opium and heroin processing units in the neighborhood although no such facility has been found. The Excise Department has found no poppy harvest being taken out of the area. Moreover, on March 2, a Post contact confiscated 200 mg of opium from a person, indicating the presence of the processed opium in the area.

¶6. (U) It appears that illicit poppy cultivation in West Bengal is moving north, away from Nadia and Murshidabad districts. According to the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), about 13,000 acre in Nadia and 3,300 acre in Murshidabad districts were under poppy cultivation in 2007. The NCB and the Criminal Investigation Department destroyed poppy crop from nearly 10,000 acre, valued at USD 80 million, and arrested 200 people. The Magistrate of Nadia told post that farmers in his district have not cultivated poppy this year.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite a crackdown in 2007, illicit poppy cultivation continues in West Bengal. Two trends are visible. The location is shifting towards the less crowded Northern districts that also provide easier getaways through interstate and international borders. Also, poppy fields are now smaller in size, hidden amongst other legitimate crop. Enforcement officials have not been able to identify the network providing cash inducement to farmers for this illicit cultivation. In North Dinajpur, the seizure and destruction of poppy crops was done by the West Bengal government's Excise Department and not by any Indian federal agency. Despite the best of intentions, the state's Excise Department has no resources to effectively control the poppy cultivation.

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